

LETTERS FROM KALIMANTAN: II

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From January 1963 until May 1964, my husband and I lived in Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo), where we did anthropological research. The bulk of our time (April 1963-April 1964) was spent in the small village of Telang in the province of Central Kalimantan, where we collected ethnographic data on the Ma'anjan, a Dajak ethnic group. During the course of our stay in Kalimantan, I wrote a series of "letters home," in which I recorded our experience and impressions in a more personal form than field notes could have provided. The following passages are the second installment of excerpts from this "journal."

Telang, May 3, 1963

Life is barely beginning to settle into a routine now that we have been in Telang for two weeks. We were able to move into our house immediately, and fortunately the building work we had commissioned on our earlier visit had been completed. We are now the proud owners of the only toilet in Telang, which is something of a distinction! The house has a frame construction with a shingled roof, built up on piles which raise it about three feet off the ground. There is a large front room, which we use as living and study space, and two small rooms in back, one of which serves for storage, the other being completely filled with our bed and its mosquito-net canopy. The kitchen is a small structure of flimsier construction built off to one side. I am just beginning to get the hang of working in it. Although the local women cook with wood fires, I have been using a pair of small kerosene stoves we bought in Hong Kong, and am very grateful to have them. We begin to appreciate the difficulties of subsistence in the area, even after a few weeks. Fish is available, but everyone catches just enough for his own household, and there is no one to sell us a regular supply. Some vegetables and fruits are for sale once a week in the market, but one must rise and shop by six in order to get anything at all. Chickens and pigs are raised by each family, but the animals are treated somewhat as family members and thus rarely find their way into the pot. Since there is no systematic attempt to collect the eggs, one is apt to wind up with rotten

ones. We are finding the few food supplies we brought with us invaluable.

Telang, May 18, 1963

The dry season is beginning, meaning that now we only get heavy thundershowers once a week, still enough to fill our rain barrel. During the middle of the day, the temperature rises into the 90's; nights are actually colder than they were during the rainy season, and we always sleep with a blanket or two. The river has dried up considerably, making fish a good deal easier to catch. I've been broiling large catfish over coals, which makes a delicious meal.

Life has its annoyances, and for me the chief one at present is ants. Large ants, small ants, black ants, red ants, biting ants, ...we've had to resort to using Ma'anjan names for them because there are so many. And all of them like our house. Tiny ones get into anything, even screw-top jars; medium-sized black ones march by the thousands, up into our rafters by night and back out again by day (our house seems to have been built on an ant migration route); large red ants get into all our food; still larger red ones bite with the sharp sting of a wasp. Our small supply of DDT was used, ineffectively and unnecessarily we now realize, on the marching variety, and we have nothing left with which to combat the others.

When we first arrived in Telang a month ago, the villagers were harvesting the rice crops from their distant fields. Houses were deserted and shuttered tight, and we began to wonder if we would ever find any people to study. But now the harvest is in, and people have come back from their fields. There is activity throughout the day, and children play in the street. School, which was closed during harvest time, has reopened. At night the young people frequently gather to dance and sing, either here in Telang or in one of the other villages. And we begin to feel more at home.

At the end of June, in the neighboring villages of Siong and Murutuwu, a large death ceremony, called idjambe, is to be held. In the course of the ceremony the bones of people who have died since the last ceremony are disinterred from the ground, cleaned, put into new coffin-like containers, and finally burned at the climax of an extensive nine-day ritual. The idjambe ceremony is a distinctive feature of the Padju Epat Ma'anjan, for it is not practiced by other Dajak groups, even those who speak "our" language. This may well be the last time the ceremony is ever given in our area, since the costs are too great to be borne in the face of the current inflation. We are told that a number of people plan to convert to Christianity following the ceremony. Here in Telang, where a large number

of the inhabitants (41 per cent) are Christians, the ceremony has not been performed since 1951.

Telang, June 15, 1963

Ceremonial preparations for idjambe have now begun in both Murutuwu and Siong, and we have been frantically attending events: photographing everything going on, recording activities, and trying to keep pace with our mushrooming notes. The real beginning of the ceremony is marked by the preparation of tuak, or rice-beer, a month before the ceremony itself begins. Tuak is made from a special kind of glutinous rice. The grain is first cooked, cooled, mixed with a number of powdered roots and yeast, and finally put into a large earthenware jar to brew. No water is added at first while the fermentation begins; but before the brew is actually served, both water and sugar are added to dilute the mash. Drinking tuak is an essential part of every Dajak ceremony. Fortunately I do not have to keep pace with the older men, who drink it to loosen their tongues before the ceremonial speeches begin. Al however has been holding his own in this department.

Telang, June 24, 1963

The beginning of idjambe has been put off for several days, and we have had a little time to breathe and reorganize ourselves. The pace of life here in the village has really accelerated. Each day people have been arriving by bicycle, by canoe, and by foot. All carry huge loads on their backs, the bones of their dead, rice for the ceremony, and their personal effects. As idjambe involves the sacrifice of animals, crates of pigs and chickens are tied to the backs of bicycles. The pigs don't like this procedure, and some are particularly vociferous in their disapproval. Most colorful are the fighting cocks, magnificent creatures of gold, red and green, with sweeping tails. Although the squeals of the pigs are largely ignored, the cocks are lovingly stroked and fondled by their owners.

For over fifty years now, the Ma'anjans from the area of Padju Epat have been emigrating to more fertile areas in the north. But even if these villagers have deserted their home villages for all practical purposes, they still must return the bones of their dead to Padju Epat for final death rites. The village of Siong, with an everyday population of less than two hundred, is now teeming with life. Children play until late evening, and the adults gather everywhere to gossip. A whole line of temporary cafes is being thrown up along the village street, some by local villagers and others by entre-

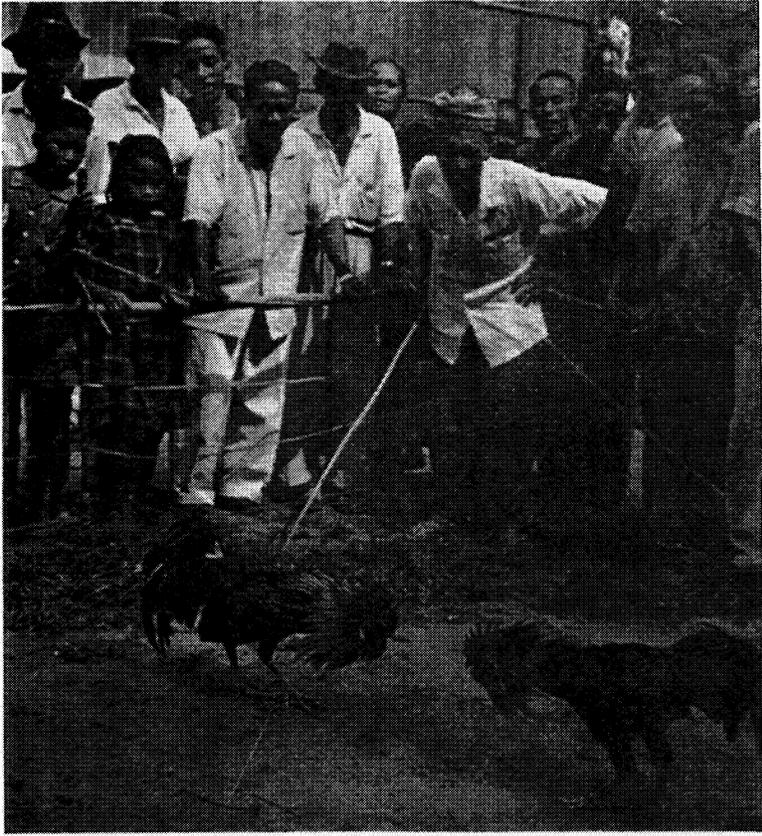
preneurs from outside Padju Epat. The only sound missing from the festive atmosphere is the tinkling of gongs, since dancing has been forbidden since the brewing of tuak was begun.

Telang, July 5, 1963

Idjambe is well under way in Murutuwu now; the ceremony officially began a week ago today, although the preparatory rituals started two days earlier. We find that the ceremony is as much an endurance marathon as anything else, since there is some sort of activity throughout the day and most of the night. Each day has particular jobs assigned to it: construction at the burning-site is done daily by the men; the women prepare the ritual decorations, mostly woven from coconut leaves, that are used at night by the shaman-priests or wadian. Every morning four or five pigs are sacrificed; their blood is used to sanctify the day's work, and the meat is fed to the assembled throng at various times of the day and night, during which time it gets progressively gamier. Meals are ceremonially served to all participants following every piece of work, with long lines of women carrying rice from various kitchens in the village to the central ceremonial hall.

Cockfights are an essential element of the ceremony, and occur both in the mornings and afternoons. Though purportedly held to entertain the spirits of the dead on their journey to the afterworld, cockfights provide plenty of enjoyment for the living as well. People collect from miles around to enter their cocks or to bet on the outcome of the fights. According to adat tradition, opposing cocks must be supported by bets of equal sums of money (the amount depending upon the popularity of the cocks). Supporters of the winner receive double their contributions, while the losers forfeit all. A great many individuals, however, also bet privately among themselves, even though this latter practice is theoretically outlawed by the government. Lengthy preparations are involved for each match: first two cocks that are eager to fight must be found; then equal bets are placed, and finally the birds are teased by their handlers -- tails pulled, feathers ruffled -- to arouse a fighting temper. The fight itself is a remarkably short affair, lasting only seconds, since each cock has a long spur tied to one leg which is liberally coated with a fast-acting poison. One cock died within two minutes of having been spurred. This certainly eliminates any ambiguity as to the winner. People say that a man injured by these spurs may also die.

Throughout the day and night the ceremony is punctuated by the booming of the large gongs, a sound that carries a great distance. As many as eleven big gongs are hung on a rack in the ceremonial hall, to be played in intricate rhythmic



Cockfight Outside the Ceremonial Hall.



Photos by Alfred Hudson, 1963

Wadian (shaman-priestesses) Chanting Incantations.

patterns by two musicians. (Both Al and I have tried our hand at playing them, much to everyone's amusement.)

In the evening, the wadian (shaman-priests) gather in the ceremonial hall, ready for a night of interminable chants as they guide the spirits of the dead on their journey to the afterworld. The wadian for death rites are all old women; their leader is a remarkable old lady who must be at least ninety. She is thin and wrinkled, but her voice is strong and resonant, and somehow she manages to stay awake all night as well as most of the day. The wadian sit before what looks like an altar built in front of a stack of coffins piled in the ceremonial hall, where food offerings have been arranged for the dead. They chant, sometimes singly, sometimes in pairs, on and on in repetitious phrases, throwing bits of rice over the coffins, and waving knives carved to resemble serpents. Their heads are covered with special red cloths, and clusters of leaves rise from the back of their headdresses, giving them a colorful and exotic appearance.

Towards midnight, the work of the male elders begins. Tuak is consumed in competitions between pairs of men drinking from water-buffalo horns. Then two elders are selected to give a traditional speech outlining the origins and history of the idjambe ceremony. The real fun comes with choosing the speakers, and when a good deal of tuak has been consumed, the men often sing long songs, the lyrics of which seem more important than the melody. In elaborate orations various elders are nominated to speak, and then the nominees, in witty phrases that provoke great hilarity, proceed to proclaim how untalented they are at speechmaking. When a speaker has finally been chosen -- whether through default or sheer persistence on the part of the other participants -- he drinks another round of tuak, sits in a chair and begins to speak in the "old" language of the Ma'anjan people, intoning the rhythmic cadences of the classical oratorical style. Since it is usually two or three in the morning by this time, the audience, having drunk and sung and laughed its fill, stretches out on the floor to catch a little sleep, leaving the speaker alone with the spirits of the dead -- and the anthropologist with his tape recorder.

Speechmaking usually lasts until early morning, and facing the prospect of twenty-four hour participant observation, we decided to split forces to allow us to cover the entire ceremony. Al takes over night shifts, since he qualifies as an elder and can drink tuak with the best of them. I take over day duty. For six days and nights we catch fleeting glimpses of each other, long enough to report on what has occurred during our "watch," then home to try to catch some sleep. Today the ceremony has had to be postponed for a day, since an essential element is a water buffalo who is due to be sacrificed. The animal is being walked to Murutuwu from a town fifty kilometers away, and, perhaps cognizant of his fate, he is reportedly

being quite obstinate about the whole business. And we are delighted to rest!

Telang, July 27, 1963

Idjambe ceremonies are now over in both Murutuwu and Siong, and we have been led through a great many new experiences. We have collected a vast amount of material, some of it so raw that it will take months to assimilate. There have been a number of consequences of the ceremony, some pleasant and others tragic. For ourselves, once we got a little sleep, we have been reaping the benefits of our hard work. In terms of personal relationships, our position here is much more secure than it was earlier, and we have developed close friendships with a number of individuals who will be of great help to us.

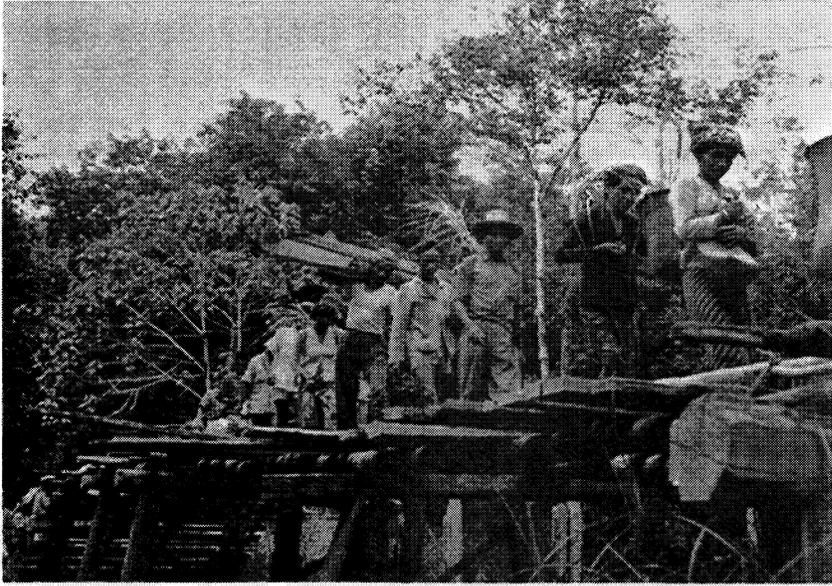
Among the people we have gotten to know, our most valuable friendship is with the pangulu (the traditional religious or adat head) of Murutuwu and his family. Our first contact with his family was through his twenty-year-old daughter Rosmida, a vivacious and warm-hearted girl who is the elementary school teacher in Murutuwu. A graduate of junior high school, she was the first person from Murutuwu to approach us when we arrived. At that point she wanted to learn English (she had studied some in school), and ever since she has proved a most dependable, though somewhat credulous, informant. Through our friendship with Rosmida we got to know her parents, and her father took us on as pupils for the study of adat. Thus for us it was especially tragic that when cholera, the disease we had most feared, appeared at the idjambe ceremony in Murutuwu, it claimed the life of Rosmida's mother.

On the day the water buffalo was sacrificed, we were given a sizeable portion of fresh meat, and went home to feast. Since Al had been up throughout the previous night recording speeches, he stayed home, and in the late afternoon I went back to Murutuwu. Around seven that evening I went up to Rosmida's house, where we had been keeping our equipment, to find that her mother had been stricken with cholera about one in the afternoon. By the time I saw her, she was in a state of collapse and there wasn't anything one could do except sit and watch her die. Earlier in the afternoon, Rosmida had fetched the male nurse from Telang. She hadn't requested our help since we had repeatedly said that we could do nothing to aid a patient with cholera. And indeed there was nothing I could do. The dying woman's relatives had gathered about her, some already sobbing uncontrollably. Others tried to make her comfortable, putting pillows under her or pulling them out again. All the while her hands and feet were being felt, to see if she were getting cold yet. Her daughters spoke to her in loud voices, trying to elicit some sort of

response. Offerings were prepared by her son and a few other men. Two male shaman-healers, one a first cousin, tried their art. Her cousin recited long incantations, frequently peering at her to see if she showed any improvement. The other man tried to blow the sickness out of her. Starting near her head, he blew towards her feet, throwing rice as he did so. He worked down toward the navel, then to the feet themselves, the place where the sickness would leave the body. Throughout this scene, the pangulu himself sat quietly by his dying wife's head, well aware that all this activity was in vain. Around eight that evening, she began to sink faster, and her family -- children, brothers, cousins -- clustered around her on all sides, holding her tightly. The pangulu clasped her head and tried to communicate with her. The women broke into wails before her last breath had passed, and by the time she actually died about thirty people were packed around her. As soon as she was dead, the house filled with people and the preparations were begun for wrapping the corpse. Gongs were brought out and beaten with rapid strokes, the announcement to the rest of the village that a death had occurred. The scene was so confused and I was so tired and upset, that I did not stay to witness further proceedings, making my way home by moonlight.

The death put a dampening effect on the conclusion of the idjambe ceremony in Murutuwu, and those involved in the ceremony brought it to a rapid conclusion, beginning the actual cremation at three in the morning. Cholera, of course, is greatly feared, and people from northern villages made their way home as rapidly as possible. By the time of Rosmida's mother's burial, a day later, the once teeming village was practically deserted except for the mourners. Thus our opportunity to witness the ceremony's climax, the bone-burning itself, was delayed until the conclusion of idjambe in Siong, some ten days later.

During an idjambe, once the Shamans have completed their incantations, usually in the early morning hours, the coffins containing exhumed bones are taken out of the ceremonial hall, and in a lengthy procession that travels at breakneck pace, are carried to the cremation site in the forest, about a half-mile from the village. Relatives carry baskets crammed with ritual paraphernalia, equipment for the journey of the dead, food for the spirits of the dead, and even live chickens which are released at the conclusion of the ceremony. The coffins are burned on a platform that has been constructed during the previous days of the ceremony. The actual space for burning is only about four feet square, and thus only two or three coffins can be burned at a time. The boat-shaped coffins are placed on end inside this structure, decorated with various objects, soaked with kerosene, and set afire. As flames envelop the coffins, the lids are the first to burn through and the bones fall to the base of the platform, where they are gradually reduced to ash. The ash is then collected by the near relatives



Procession from the Ceremonial Hall to the Cremation Site.



The Cremation Site at Siong.

Photos by Alfred Hudson, 1963

of the dead and dumped into large gongs, in readiness for the trip to the final resting place (a number of ironwood boxes called tambak).

The cremation procedure is repeated until all the coffins have been burned. Then the relatives of the dead gather up the ritual paraphernalia, together with the gongs containing the ashes, for the last time. The permanent receptacles for the ashes, the tambak, are located in each village. There are twenty-two in all in Padju Epat. Each family must deposit the ashes of their dead in the tambak of the group to which they belong. Thus, after the wadian have chanted the final incantations over the ashes, processions are formed to the various tambak sites. Again the columns move at lightning pace, and I have quite a time taking photographs while trying to stay with the procession. We move rapidly through the forest, across a long-abandoned rice field (the whole procession clambering over felled tree trunks), along an tree-hung river bank and finally to a spot where we ford the river. The crowd, as it moves along, is noisy and gay; loud chatter, shouts and laughter fill the woods. And one feels as though the ceremony is indeed concluded; the hard work, the exhaustion of the previous days has been cathartic in effect, and one is now joyfully rid of one's dead. On reaching the tambak site, the lids of the boxes are opened, old ashes removed to make room for the new, and the gongs' contents emptied into the receptacles. The supplies for the journey of the dead -- baskets with clothes, dishes, and personal effects -- are dumped by or hung on the tambak. As a final act, young chickens are released everywhere. (We are told that the chickens are to accompany the dead as fighting cocks.) The ash receptacles are closed, and we all depart for our respective villages, this time in small groups and not as one long procession.

Seven days after the burning, there is another ceremony -- the transition period between the time when adat for the dead and adat for the living is in force. Gladness officially returns to the village at last; dancing and music, which have been prohibited since the making of tuak a month before idjambe, again enliven the village. The ceremony which marks the transition is one of the last remnants of the Ma'anjan headhunting tradition. An essential property of the ritual is a fragment of an old skull taken in battle many years ago. The skull, tied inside a forked stick, is carried out to the cremation site when relatives bring food to the spirits of their dead for the final time. Then everyone but a few younger men scurries back to the ceremonial hall in the village, the men arming themselves with blunted spears. Once returned to the village, we all clamber up into the ceremonial hall, and a few musicians begin to strike the small dancing-gongs. Throughout idjambe we have heard only the heavy rhythmic pulsing of the large gongs, and the contrast between that sound and the light tinkling of the small gongs makes one really feel the "return to life."

Al stayed at the cremation site along with the young men and reported that they grouped themselves into a war party, tying red scarves around their heads, arming themselves with blunt spears, and finally touching the head itself to give them courage. They then raced back to the village, whooping all the way, bursting from the woods and into the clearing surrounding the ceremonial hall. The defending forces engaged the raiding party in a series of mock combats, but the raiding party swirled around the sacrificial pole and then, led by the man carrying the head, swooped up into the hall. All the while, the gongs were striking the melody of an old song used to welcome newly captured heads into the village. Once inside, the men began to dance in measured rhythmic steps, a long scarf (selendang) made of a special red cloth called tjindai draped over their shoulders. Within minutes, one of the raiders had danced himself into a trance; he jumped around wildly for a few minutes until someone pushed him over, and he fell like a lead soldier. Other people crowded onto the floor to dance, those with newly cremated relatives being the first to express the severance of the ties with the dead. So the dancing continued late into the night, and the great death ritual was terminated.